



## NEW WORKPLACES & LITERACIES

# Facing NAFTA: Literacy and work in México

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On January 1, 1994, México formally joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada. NAFTA proposes opening completely the trade frontiers between the three countries by 2010. Thus, the country ranked 48 on the United Nations Human Development Index entered a partnership with the countries ranked 2 and 1 respectively on the same index. By entering NAFTA the Mexican government took on a difficult challenge to bring the country "in a relatively short 15 years, to an economic and social level that will allow it to compete with major economic powers" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994, p. 141). Much interest—and many conflicting opinions—ensued over how the southern neighbor would fare in this partnership.

Shortly afterwards México also officially joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), having earlier (October 1992) requested an OECD review of its science and technology policy. This underscored the importance attached by the Salinas government to science and technology-driven modernization (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994). The subsequent government, led by President Zedillo, further consolidated this agenda. With a new election imminent at the time of writing, it is difficult to envisage any likely incoming government deviating significantly from the direction of economic and social

development already in place. (Indeed, the election result ensures that, if anything, the existing policies will be strengthened.)

### Baseline: Uneven terrain

Looking at literacy in relation to some of the most visible features of everyday life and work in México indicates the depth and complexity of the challenge it faces in its quest for closer economic integration with so-called advanced economies.

A most striking feature of the Mexican scene is its sheer unevenness. In terms of its large population and the economic resources it controls, México's Gross Domestic Product calculated as purchasing power parities would be among the top 10 or so of OECD countries. Yet its per capita income calculated as purchasing power parities positions México among low-income OECD partners like Greece and Turkey. Moreover, this per capita income is very unevenly distributed. A conservative estimate of poverty in 1987 was that more than 20 million people (20%) endured conditions of extreme poverty. A study (Boltvinik, 1998) using less severe measures suggests that 72 million Mexicans live in poverty, up from 61 million 2 years earlier. A current newspaper report identifies México as one of just three Latin American and Caribbean countries where poverty and malnutrition have increased during the past decade—the others being Nicaragua and Venezuela. According to figures produced by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, between

1990 and 1999 the number of Mexicans in misery increased from 32 to 43 million and the numbers of malnourished from 4.4 to 5.1 million ("Se incrementaron," 2000).

On another level, the OECD team that evaluated México's science and technology policy portrayed México as "a collage of exciting, future-oriented, world class institutions, side by side with overstaffed and underperforming institutions from the past" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994, p. 141). The team also spoke of México's social and economic structure as characteristically transitional, combining "advanced industries, efficient structures, and highly educated people, as well as underdevelopment and widespread poverty and illiteracy." In a diplomatic understatement, they also affirmed that "income distribution has traditionally been more uneven in Mexico than in typical OECD countries" (p. 141).

Income inequalities are associated with notoriously low wages for a wide range of jobs. Indeed, the director general of Employment and Training in México's Federal District identifies low wages paid for industrial, service, and commercial work as the main reason vast numbers of Mexico City's inhabitants prefer participation in the informal economy over employment in the formal economy ("Disminuyó," 2000). This phenomenon is true for the country as a whole. An official unemployment rate of just 3% was reported for the Federal District in February 2000, and unemployment nationally was reported officially at (just) 900,000. México's economically active population is estimated officially at 40 million and growing by 1.2 million people annually. According to Botzman (1999), the annual shortfall of jobs in the formal economy is approximately 400,000 and growing. Only automobile assembly and fruit and vegetable production have been

generating jobs at anything like the percentage of growth in México's economically active population, and these sectors account for a tiny proportion of total employment. Taken together, and even if we treat official figures skeptically, such statistics indicate the proportions of the informal economy and the employment slack it is absorbing.

The low wage "reality" cuts two ways. It makes México an attractive source of labor for national and transnational companies seeking low wage work. At the same time, however, it undermines in diverse ways the process of developing a well educated, highly skilled, quality-oriented workforce. The need for children to contribute to family income denies millions access to formal education. Yet completing basic education has become the minimal requirement for jobs in the formal economy ("Se incrementaron," 2000). Developing a more highly educated population is integral to the government's modernization agenda. Furthermore, work in the informal economy is at best tangential to the core concepts, values, skills, and practices of the new global capitalism (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996).

### A prognosis

In relation to such considerations the OECD team surmised that if México is to attain a sufficient social and economic level to compete with advanced economic powers like the U.S. and Canada by 2010, the Mexican government will need to lead and steer "an extraordinary effort of educational, structural, technological and management upgrading, *a process which must involve all elements of Mexican society and all aspects of its economy*" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994, p. 141, emphasis added).

### Poverty and exclusion: A counter logic

Looking at literacy and education in relation to work pinpoints some key dimensions of that "extraordinary effort" that will have to be made on the educational and structural fronts. An entrenched counter logic confronts head on the prognosis offered by the OECD. This is a logic by which the many living in poverty are systematically excluded from access to the very kinds of learning required by México's economic project. It has the following elements.

1. Poverty prevents almost 1 million students annually from completing basic education, which is the bottom line for employment in the formal economy.

2. This situation automatically excludes them from participation in formal job-related training provided by companies and company-government partnership schemes (see Botzman, 1999). Such training is a key context for the kind of workforce upgrading deemed necessary for México to become competitive within NAFTA (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994).

3. The poor are excluded from private-sector provision of job-related training—e.g., courses in computing, English language, management, and administration—by the costs involved.

4. Those adult literacy and education programs available gratis through the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública) are largely irrelevant to the nature and demands of work in the economic world of NAFTA. This, however, is the one education and training option that remains open—in principle—to the poor.

To this extent, a deep and powerful impediment exists to the project of involving "all elements of Mexican society and all aspects of

its economy" in "educational, structural, technological and management upgrading" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994, p. 141).

### **Educational statistics in general: Unequal competition**

México's population is 96 million, of whom 64 million are aged 15 and over—the official age for completing basic education in México. Of those over 15, there are 36 million (56%) who have not completed basic education. Official data break this figure down into 11 million who have not completed primary education, a further 19 million have not completed secondary education, and 6 million more (almost 10% of the adult population) who are illiterate (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1999). Each year a further 800,000 young people drop out of basic education (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 1999). In comparative terms, so far as participation in NAFTA is concerned, Mexicans aged 25 and over have completed an average of 4.7 education grade equivalents. Corresponding figures for the U.S. and Canada are 12.3 and 12.1 grades respectively (Gutiérrez, 1998). This throws great weight on adult education and training sectors to help redress some balance. Unfortunately, these are not in adequate shape at present to meet the challenge.

### **Literacy in particular**

The official picture of illiteracy in México is problematic. According to government sources (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1999) the statistic of 6 million illiterate adults has remained constant for some decades, and illiteracy is concentrated among rural and remote populations—especially indigenous groups—older people, and women. Critics challenge this view.

Some reject the minimalist criteria for assessing illiteracy and argue for a wider concept of literacy than simply knowing letters and sounds. Rather, literacy involves being able to use contextualized knowledge to achieve ends (Kaiman, 1996). Critics also contest the official demographics. They argue that official figures do not take into account the large numbers of young people dropping out of school early, or the fact that some places—especially Mexico City—attract large numbers of people looking for work. Hence, the traditional patterns of illiteracy still cited by government are alleged to have broken down. Current indications are that illiteracy is now more or less equal by gender, is more prevalent among younger than older people, and is common in larger cities (Hernández Flores, in process).

To this extent, the official view seems blind to entire populations vital to the new economic agenda based on participation in NAFTA—namely, socioeconomically impoverished young people and urban inhabitants. This blindness is manifest in public sector literacy and training provision for postschool-age people.

México's adult literacy policies and programs have been tied historically to a remedial and compensatory tradition of adult education. This trend continues. Within programs provided under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Education, literacy is addressed in terms of decontextualized skills of encoding and decoding, without reference to who the learners in a group are, what they do, or where and how they do it. With respect to literacy in relation to work specifically, the various policies and programs concerned with workplace literacy and training that are common in Britain, the United States, Australasia, and Europe simply do not exist in México.

The National Institute for Adult Education (NIAE) is officially responsible for providing free adult literacy programs. Currently, the official instructional approach is the Generic Word Method. However the kinds of materials originally associated with this approach in the work of educators like Paulo Freire and like-minded community educators—e.g., activities for discussing existential themes, examples of syllabic families, a Literacy Teacher's Manual, and texts designed with dispossessed adult learners in mind—have been replaced with a book series called *The Word Is Ours*. Pedagogy varies greatly from class to class, often deviating from official prescriptions. In some cases, even those responsible for training literacy educators are not familiar with the Generic Word Method.

Other adult literacy providers working independently of the NIAE but under the umbrella of the Ministry include Basic Education Centers and Cultural Missions. Their teaching and learning approaches often mirror those of schools, because the teachers have mainly been trained to teach children in classrooms. The programs also tend to follow school procedures for evaluating and accrediting learning. Observations of work in a range of these sites reveal teachers using all sorts of approaches: onomatopoeic, phonetic, structural analytic, and eclectic methods (Hernández Flores, in process). Pedagogies are relative to the haphazard prior experiences of individual teachers. Most work with very few materials, with demand far exceeding what government sources provide. Groups have been observed using a resource called *Introduction to Intensive Primary*, published in 1976 (Hernández Flores, in process).

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that adult literacy is viewed by government as being the least important sector. Indeed, an extensive

study provides evidence for the view that the slight reduction in illiteracy between 1980 and 1990 was not due to the activities of the NIAE but rather to the work of formal education and, in particular, primary education (Ulloa & Latapí, 1996).

## Work-related training

A range of public sector bodies under the Ministry's Department of Adult Education provide occupational courses for adult learners. Besides the National Institute for Adult Education, they include the Integral Family Development system and the Mexican Institute for Social Security. Typical courses include dressmaking, woodwork, embroidery, short-hand and typing, beauty and deportment, gardening, running small businesses, and the like. Most provide little or nothing that prepares learners for the contemporary work world, which calls for multi-skilled workers who can cope with the demands of flexible workplaces and new organizational and management styles and ethos. Instead, these courses are more applicable to do-it-yourself consumption within private domestic economies.

The courses reflect traditional activity in the sector, as well as low levels of financial support that constrain the available infrastructure and knowledge base for providing programs that are more responsive to learner interests and rapidly changing work environments. Inefficient intersectorial and interinstitutional administration works against optimizing those limited resources that are available.

In fact, even within private sector organizations in México the emphasis on formal training programs for work is a new phenomenon (Botzman, 1999). Although Mexican companies are legally required to provide job training for employees, estimates are that less than half comply to any extent. Many are

hampered by their small size. A 1995 study cited in Botzman (1999) found that just 18.5% of México's workforce had undergone training courses and 6.5% had more than 500 hours of training experience, compared to more than 25% in the U.S. Work-based training culture and the training center concept is confined to large companies, particularly transnationals. Very few small (15–100 employees) firms, and virtually no micro (1–15 employees) firms provide serious training opportunities.

In such a climate it is hardly surprising to find that occupational courses in the traditional adult education sector are out of touch with work-related training requirements.

## Between rocks and hard places

Around the world, countries that have bought into economic and modernization agendas similar to México's have typically rationalized welfare provision, opting for "minimal welfare safety nets" and increased emphasis on "individual responsabilization" (de Alba, González-Gaudiano, Lankshear, & Peters, 2000, pp. 36–37). They have also promoted privatized training provision and employed cost recovery measures within postcompulsory education.

Paradoxically, if México is to benefit long term from its participation in NAFTA and its commitment to OECD-style modernization goals, its government may have to depart from the international norm. It will have to consider greatly expanding the social wage by actively supporting families in poverty, so that their children can complete basic education, and by underwriting radical reform of adult literacy and work-related training programs in the public domain. Without such measures, the extraordinary effort that will be needed by 2010 is unlikely to eventuate.

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